

Oklahoma survivor recounts harrowing escape

By DUANE H. REVELTS
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"All hands man your battle stations! The Japs are bombing hell out of us!" These words screamed over the address system of the USS Oklahoma, accompanied by the shrill sound of the ship's alarm, brought me to my feet with a start. A sudden, thunderous explosion in the forward part of the ship brought me quickly to my senses. I realized I'd had no bad dream, but was experiencing the real thing that Sunday morning, Dec. 7, 1941.

Clad only in undershorts, I headed for my battle station, not knowing that I had no way out. As I passed through the hatches leading from compartment to compartment on the third deck, men yelled to keep moving, and the thud of the closing hatches could be heard as they were closed and dogged down behind me.

My heart pounding, I finally reached the hatch leading to my battle station on the second deck. Just as I reached out for the ladder, a torpedo ripped into the side of the ship, somewhere in the forward area. The ship seemed to raise up out of the water by the bow, reel and twist, sending me swinging around the ladder, and then settled down listing heavily to port. Regaining my balance, I moved swiftly up the ladder.

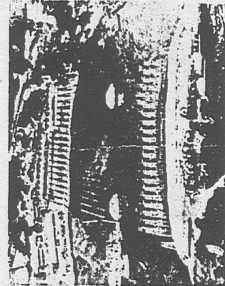
Once through the hatch to the second deck, I raced to my station at the starboard page. My supervisor, Andy Seeger, had already reached it. So had a couple of others. We exchanged glances and fear shown on all our faces. Without a word, we quickly rolled back the cover on the flag bag and stood ready at our station. The steady, muffled booming of anti-aircraft guns outside made us wonder what it was like topside.

Just as the phone talker was reporting our station manned and ready, another torpedo or bomb, I don't know which, ripped into the ship near the stern. Water was rushing in below us with the sound of a waterfall.

The seemingly long lapse of communication with the bridge was suddenly broken. We were ordered to the third deck. It was supposed to be a long march down here, so we quickly proceeded to our stations.

I suddenly found myself standing at the foot of the ladder on the third deck. Andy at my side. We were fortunate to be in this position as it was difficult to keep our footing without the support of the ladder. The ship was now listing at about 45 degrees and sinking rapidly. From the splashing, gushing sounds and the silvery flashes of light below us, we could tell that the water and oil was rising fast as the ship rolled further to port.

We were exceptionally quiet. The only sounds were the steady hammering of anti-air-



Cables were attached to the capsized Oklahoma as it was being righted.

craft weapons outside the ship. The stillness of the men was soon shattered. With an agonizing yell, a man lost his grip and slid into the darkness of the oil and water rapidly filling the compartment. Soon came another yell and another. One after the other, men would lose footing and slip into the blackness below, and disappear.

With a slight nudge, Andy directed me to turn toward the ladder. We prepared to head for topside and some means of escape from the stricken ship. "Now!" he exclaimed. I suddenly found myself being lifted and pushed through the hatch above by the yelling, screaming men, who had reacted hysterically to our signal.

The ship was now practically on its side, the decks slanting dangerously. I tumbled out on the deck above. The men ran in all directions, shouting hysterically. Some stumbled and fell, and I found myself alone. I kept telling myself there had to be a way out. Suddenly I remembered the ray of light that had kept us from complete darkness while trapped on the third deck. It had come from a porthole in sickbay and the doorway was just ahead. It was going to be difficult, for the ship had rolled so far on its side the opening was almost straight above me.

I began working my way up to the open porthole. It was more difficult than I had anticipated, but I was determined to make it. Getting a good grip on the angle-iron above me, I stretched my arm out toward the porthole as far as I could reach. My fingertips just folded around the edge of the porthole. I let go of the angle-iron, swung out beneath the opening, and quickly grasped the edge with my other hand. With what seemed my last ounce of strength, I pulled myself up as though climbing myself, and my head and shoulders popped up

through the opening to freedom. I pulled myself the rest of the way out of the porthole and lay stretched out on my stomach, exhausted.

The ship was lying completely on its side now, and still rolling over. Standing up, I moved around the bottom, and as I walked, I looked around the harbor at the devastating sight. I gasped at what I saw.

Most of the firing had ceased. A short distance on our stern, smoke and flames rose high coming from the USS Arizona. Smoke billowed from ships all around the harbor. The water below me was filled with screaming men, clamoring to reach a motor launch that had disappeared into the sea. The water was covered with oil and debris.

Believing the initial attack over, by the absence of gunfire, I looked toward the USS Maryland tied up inboard of my ship. She was about 75 feet away and still afloat. The possibility of the Oklahoma, exploding and sinking, crossed my mind. I knew I must do something.

My decision came quickly when I saw the gun crews of the Maryland train their anti-aircraft weapons skyward. I looked up, and to the east, coming in over the mountains, a flight of planes came into view. I slid off the bottom feet first, for the long plunge into the water.

Gasping for breath and wiping the oil from my face with my forearm, I looked around desperately. I spotted it about 30 feet toward the heavy smoke and flame of the Arizona. I began swimming frantically to reach it. It was surrounded by screaming, yelling men trying to get in.

Planes roared overhead, their guns firing. Bullets ricocheted off the bottom of the Oklahoma, and small geysers of water around me sent a wave of fear through my body.

The launch, overloaded and with men clinging to its side, suddenly began taking on water.

Within seconds it sank, spilling the men back into the slimy, burning water.

Still determined to save myself, I began kicking my feet fiercely, and swinging my arms erratically in an effort to get myself to the Maryland. Nearly exhausted, my hands finally touched the side of the ship. Holding on to the top of the blister, along the ship's side, I padded and guided myself to a line hanging from the ladder above.

Padding and guiding myself, I got a firm grip on the line and began the climb up the side of the ship. My hands were oily and wet and about halfway up I lost my grip and slipped back into the water. Finding the line again, but too weak to attempt it once more, I just clung to the end of the line, tired and frightened.

Guns above were still blazing and I felt quite alone and unprotected in the water. I looked up at the ship; a man spotted me and offered help. With him pulling and me climbing, I made it over the rail. I fell exhausted on the deck.

Tired and stunned, I finally pulled myself up and sat leaning against the bulkhead. Looking back at the mighty Oklahoma, now overboard, a strange sensation went through my body. I realized that the war I had experienced had been. The thought of men still in the water sickened me. Suddenly I knew I was no longer just a boy of 18, but had become a man. Jumping up, I raced to take my position in a line of men passing ammunition to a five-inch gun.

Duane H. Revelts is a resident of St. Augustine, Fla. The above remarks were taken from memoirs he wrote 22 years ago. After his rescue, he eventually linked up with his superior from the Oklahoma. He was then assigned to the USS Dewey, a destroyer, for the duration. The Oklahoma sank while being towed back to the U.S., where it was to be scrapped.

"Allhands man your battle stations!" "The Japs are bombing hell out of us!" These words screamed over the address system of the ship Oklahoma, along with the terrifying sound of the ships alarm system, brought me to my feet with a start. I'd been sleeping soundly and I stood beside my bunk for several seconds unable to comprehend immediately what was happening. A sudden thunderous explosion in the forward part of the ship brought me quickly to my senses, and I realized I had had no bad dream, but was experiencing the real thing that morning, December 7, 1941.

Clad only in my undershorts, I headed for my battle station, running faster than I had in any drill. Pushing and dodging in and out of other men on their way to their stations, I wasted no time getting to mine. As I passed through the hatches leading from compartment to compartment on the third deck, men yelled "keep moving" and the thud of the closing hatches could be heard as they were closed and dogged down behind me.

My heart pounding, I finally reached the hatch leading to my battle station on the second deck. Just as I reached for the ladder, a torpedo must have ripped into the side of the ship somewhere in the forward area I had just left. The ship seemed to raise

up out of the water by the bow, reel and twist, sending me swinging around the ladder, and then settled down listing heavily to port. Regaining my balance, I moved swiftly up the ladder.

Once through the opening to the second deck, I raced to my station as signalman on the after flag bag. Andy Sauer, my supervisor and good buddy, had already arrived. So had a couple of others. We exchanged glances and the look of fear shown on all our faces. Our first experience of war was a shocking one.

Without a word, we quickly rolled back the cover on the flag bag, and stood ready at our stations. The steady muffled sound of anti-aircraft guns could be heard and we wondered what it was like outside. I was soon to find out.

Just as the phone talker was reporting our station manned and ready to the bridge, another torpedo or bomb, I don't know which, ripped into the ship near the stern. The explosion was ear-shattering and again the ship seemed to raise up, twist and roll from side to side, twisting metal making an eerie sound as it strained against the rivets. It then gently settled down, listing farther to port. Water seemed to be rushing in below us with the sound of a waterfall. From the looks on the faces of the others, I'm sure I was not alone with the

thoughts of abandoning ship, but trained as we were, we stood fast.

The seemingly long lapse of communication with the bridge was suddenly broken. Orders via sound power phone instructed us to go to the third deck. This was a protective deck, supposed to be safe from bombs. Quickly we prepared to do as ordered.

Turning towards the hatch, which was only a few feet away, I stopped short. There standing in front of me, his body and clothing spattered with blood, stood another member of our crew, Bob Young. He had been on the morning watch and was on duty on the fo'c's'le, preparing to hoist the Union Jack when we were attacked. Obviously straffed or struck with bomb fragments, he stood there helpless and in shock, mortally wounded, staring at me.

I wish I could say I or someone did something heroic at this point. Here memory seems to fade. In the confusion of running, yelling men trying to get to the hatches leading to the third deck, and possibly the shock of seeing my first war casualty, I can't recall what happened in those few seconds getting to the safety of the third deck. I don't know if I or anyone helped this man. I only know that was the way I saw Bob last. For over twenty five years I have tried to relive this

portion of my escape from the Oklahoma, but all I can see is Bob and I standing there, frozen, facing each other.

My mind a blank, I suddenly found myself standing at the foot of the ladder, Andy at my side. We must have been the last ones down to be in this position. It was difficult to hang on as the ship was now listing at about forty five degrees and seemed to be sinking fast. By the gushing, splashing sound and the bright flashes of light from an open porthole above us, water and oil was rising fast in the compartment as the ship rolled farther to port.

I don't know how many men were in that compartment but it seemed crowded. Men clung to anything they could to keep themselves on the high part of the slanting deck. We were exceptionally quiet, as though waiting for further orders. The only sounds were the steady hammering of anti-aircraft weapons outside. They were still attacking.

The stillness of the men was soon shattered. With an agonizing yell, a man lost his grip and went sliding into the darkness of oil and water, which had gushed into the compartment, and disappeared. Soon another yell, and another. The men still clinging to someone or something were beginning to panic. I glanced at Andy. As our eyes met, fear shown and without a word we knew it was time

to get out of what was becoming a death trap.

With a slight push, Andy directed me to turn towards the ladder. We prepared to head for topside and some means of escape from the stricken ship. "Now," he said. It was signal to start up the ladder. I don't remember who was first, but I found myself being lifted up the ladder by the surging, pushing group of hysterical men who followed.

The ship now practically on its side, decks slanting dangerously, I was pushed through the hatch opening to the second deck. Unable to get my footing, I was knocked backward against the bulkhead, between a stanchion and the open hatch cover. Trapped, because of the men rushing by me like stampeding cattle, I was forced to just stand there until they were all free from the third deck.

As the men made their way in all directions, I waited. Hysteria filled the air. Men fell, bouncing off the bulkheads. They were yelling all kinds of directions as they passed. Watching them, I wondered momentarily what had happened to Andy.

Waiting almost to the last man, I picked myself up and followed. Everyone seemed to have found an escape route towards the stern. I headed for a large hatch leading to topside, assuming some of the men had escaped there. When I reached the hatch, the ladder was broken and leaning so far away from the hatch opening, ~~we~~ ^I

couldn't climb up to reach the escape hatch. "This way," someone yelled, and I began making my way back along the starboard side, seeking a way to escape.

Unable to keep up with the others, I soon found myself alone. I kept telling myself there had to be a way out. Clinging to anything that protruded from the bulkhead, I groped my way along the dark passageway. I knew I must find an escape now or it would be too late.

Suddenly I remembered the ray of light that had kept us from complete darkness on the third deck below. It had come from a porthole in sickbay and the doorway was just ahead. Gritting my teeth, half crawling and clutching the pipes and wiring along the bulkhead, I made my way to the open doorway of sickbay.

Reaching the doorway, I looked up, and there it was, my only hope, the big porthole. The portholes in this particular area were much larger than in other parts of the ship and I felt if I could only get to it, I would have little trouble getting to the outside of the ship. It was going to be difficult though, for now the ship had rolled so far on its side, the opening was almost straight above me.

Easing myself inside the doorway, I lay back against the bulkhead for a second and thought of how I was going to get over to the porthole a few feet away from the after bulkhead. I was going to have it fairly easy until

I got adjacent to the opening of the porthole. From there I wasn't sure.

It was now or never, so I began working my way up to the open porthole. It was more difficult than I had anticipated. I was shaking and tired; scared but determined. I rested while I thought about what I must do next. I would have to hang on to the angleirons with one hand and reach out with the other, grasping the edge of the porthole. If my hand slipped, I would go hurtling down through the open doorway below me and go crashing into the bulkhead of the next compartment.

Getting a good grip on the angleiron above me, I stretched my arm out towards the porthole as far as I could reach. My finger-tips just folded around the edge of the porthole. I let go of the angleiron, swinging out beneath the opening, quickly grasping the edge with my other hand. With what seemed my last ounce of strength, I pulled myself up as though chinning myself, and my head and shoulders shot up through the opening to freedom. I pulled myself the rest of the way out of the porthole and lay stretched out on my stomach, exhausted.

Sitting up, I glanced back at the porthole. Seeing a line nearby that previously must have been dangling over the side, I crawled back to it and

dropped the end through the opening. I figured it would make it much easier for anyone else still trapped below to make their escape.

The ship was lying completely on its side now, and still rolling more. Standing up, I moved around the bottom, and as I walked, I looked around the harbor at the devastating sight. I gasped at what I saw.

Most of the firing had ceased. At least I don't recall hearing any in the immediate area. A short distance on our stern, smoke and flames rose high in the air from the U.S.S. Arizona. Smoke billowed from ships all around the harbor. The water below me was filled with screaming men, clamboring to reach a motor launch that had come to the rescue. The water was covered with oil.

Believing the initial attack was over by the absence of gunfire, I looked back towards the U.S.S. Maryland tied up inboard of the Oklahoma. We were about fifty to seventy five feet apart. I figured I had two alternatives to reach safety. The possibility of the Oklahoma sinking completely, or exploding, crossed my mind. I must do something. I decided I could try for the launch or swim to the Maryland. Fearful of the long drop to the water below, I sat there on the bottom of the ship, trying to make up my mind.

My mind was made up quickly when I saw the crews on the Maryland train their anti-aircraft guns skyward. I looked up, and to the east, coming in over the mountain, a flight of planes came into view. Too high and too far away to identify, without hesitation, I slid off the bottom feet first, for the long plunge into the water below.

My knees buckled as I struck the water and I submerged below the surface, seemingly heading for the bottom. Short of breath, I began clawing with my hands in an effort to reach the surface as quickly as possible. When I felt my lungs would burst for want of air, my head suddenly broke the surface of the oily water.

Gasping for breath and wiping the oil from my face with my forearm, I looked around desperately for the Motor launch I had seen before I jumped. I spotted it about thirty feet away towards the heavy smoke and flame of the Arizona. I began swimming frantically to reach it. I was surrounded by screaming, yelling men trying to reach the rescue boat. Nearly exhausted, and filled with fear, I knew I had to reach the launch before it was loaded to capacity. My hopes vanished when suddenly planes roared overhead, their machine guns firing, and bullets ricocheted off the bottom of the Oklahoma. Small geysers of the water around me

sent a wave of fear through my body. Turning my attention again to the launch, my hopes were gone. The launch, its gunwales level with the water, suddenly began taking on water. Overloaded and with men still clinging to its side, the launch sank, spilling the men back into the slimy, oily water.

The enemy straffing attack apparently over, I realized now I must take my other alternative. I turned and headed for the Maryland. She was much farther away now and the fear of not being able to make it came over me like a sickness. I began kicking my feet fiercely and swinging my arms erratically in an effort to get myself to the side of the Maryland.

Nearly exhausted, my hands finally touched the side of the Maryland amidships. I could reach the top of the blister, so I paddled and guided myself along the side until I reached a manila line hanging from the rail above. I took hold and just hung there for awhile, to rest.

Suddenly the Maryland opened fire again. Fear and anxiety was telling me I would be much safer on the deck of the Maryland than sitting there in the water, so I attempted to climb the line. About halfway up the side, my hands oily and wet, I lost my grip and slipped back into the water. Splashing frantically, almost hysterically, my hands found the line again and once more I began the long ascent to the ship's deck.

Nearly to the rail, I began to feel weak, lost my grip again and once more plunged back into the water. Finding the line again, and believing I didn't have the strength to attempt it again, I just clung to the end of the line, tired and frightened.

Guns still firing and fearful of the water during the attack, gave me new strength to try again. As I was about to begin the long climb, someone above seeing my plight, called to me to just hang on and they would pull me to safety. I welcomed their offer and finally made it to the rail. I climbed over and fell exhausted on the deck.

Lying there stunned and exhausted, the firing stopped. I pulled myself up to the bulkhead and leaned against it on one elbow. I just wanted to rest. I couldn't. The horror of what I had experienced, the smell of burning oil and flesh, and the sight of our navy ships burning and sinking all around me flashed across my brain like a freight train racing in the night.

Looking back at the mighty Oklahoma, now overturned, the thought of men still trapped inside sickened me. Suddenly I knew I was no longer just a boy of eighteen, but had become a man in a scant twenty minutes.